

# **Retreat from Coruscant**

By Laurie Burns; Illustrations by Mike Vilardi

Taryn Clancy idly watched a comm clerk notarize acceptance of the datacards piled on the repulsorlift cart beside her. Suddenly, the busy background murmur of the old Imperial Palace's message center disappeared under the hooting of alarms.

The clerk looked up, face draining of color as she identified the warning tones. "Oh my skies," she said, sounding stunned. "Coruscant's under attack."

Taryn's eyes widened too, but she moved fast. "If you'll sign that off, I'll be on my way," she said, swiveling to push the cart closer to the clerk's counter. "There's your mail," she added, pointedly holding out her hand.

The clerk blinked, looked at her datapad, punched a few keys, and mutely handed it over. Taryn swiftly inspected her authorization, keyed in her own code, then jerked the clerk's copy out and tossed it on the counter. "Thanks," she said over her shoulder, already three steps toward the door.

Out in the corridor the alarms continued at an urgent pitch, but as she squeezed aboard a turbolift, Taryn was relieved no one seemed panicked. Though the New Republic had made the transition from military force to galactic government, the former Rebels obviously hadn't forgotten how to react to an Imperial attack. She bit her lip, knowing her hopes of leaving were optimistic at best. If Coruscant really was under attack, the planetary shield had probably been raised, and she and Del were stuck for the duration.

But she had to try. After all, who wanted to be stuck on the palace's landing pads like a clipped mynock while the Empire tried to reclaim its former capital?

*Not me*, she thought, emerging onto the bright, wind-swept platform and blinking at the brilliance of the midday sun. Reverberations from half-a-dozen ships' engines thrummed around her, and ahead, the *Messenger* added its throaty roar to the mechanical chorus. Del had the ramp down and waiting, and as she dropped into the pilot's seat, a quick scan of the displays showed they were nearly ready to lift.

"Heard the alarms," Del said, already strapped in at the co-pilot's station. "What's up?"

"Us, I hope," Taryn said shortly. Another look at the displays, and she flipped on the comm and hailed palace flight control. Her heart sank as her request for liftoff was curtly denied.

Too late -- the planetary shield had been raised. The Empire was up there, the New Republic was down here, and she and the *Messenger* were stuck in between.

Taryn slumped back in her seat. It wasn't just that she had a schedule to keep. The Core Courier Service promised prompt service among the Core Worlds, and with crates full of communications still filling half her hold, she didn't want to get too far behind.

But late deliveries were nothing compared to what Taryn feared was about to happen -- an all-out war for possession of Coruscant. Port gossip had predicted that the Empire, despite the recent loss of Grand Admiral Thrawn, was gearing up to strike at the heart of the New Republic.

It looked like they'd been right.

"Well, heck," Del said, staring out at the platform where a transport -- apparently in defiance of the controller's orders -- was lifting off. "What're we gonna do now?"

Taryn watched the transport fade to a pinprick in the sky. If the *Messenger* belonged to her, she'd be tempted to do the same. But a smart captain didn't take chances with company property. "We wait," she said, reluctantly keying off the engines. "At least until help arrives."

*If it ever did*, she added silently. The Imperials would've knocked out the comm relays first thing, cutting off the New Republic's ability to call for help from its fleets scattered through the galaxy. They had orbital defenses, of course, but -- A tiny flash caught her eye, and she leaned forward to squint out the cockpit's transparisteel view-port. "Blast," she whispered.

Del followed her gaze and saw the almost indiscernible flashes of turbolaser fire high in the sky. "We're stuck now," he said.

They watched in grim silence for a while before Taryn abruptly wondered, "How long can the planetary shield hold up?"

"I dunno," Del said. "Depends on what they throw at it, prob'ly. Couple of days, maybe ... or a couple hours."

She glanced at him. Under his gray mustache, her first mate's mouth was tight. And no wonder -- after three decades with the courier service, he was just days away from retirement. Studying the lines on his face, Taryn mentally contrasted his years of experience to her own, and suddenly felt overwhelmed with her fledgling status as captain. It *was* only her fourth run at the helm of the *Messenger*.

And it was up to her to get them out of this.

For a second she felt a niggling of the old fear; the one with her father's voice that said she flew for the courier service because she didn't have the guts to do anything else. All through her childhood, Kal Clancy boasted of his own bravado at the helm of his freighter, then he'd spent her teen years trying to mold her in his image. He hadn't bothered concealing his disappointment when she hadn't lived up to his expectations.

She looked at Del again. He'd been delivering mail longer than she'd been alive, and hadn't ever made captain. That said something for her, didn't it? *Didn't it?*

*Stop it, Taryn ordered herself. So being captain of a courier isn't very challenging. That doesn't mean I'm not competent.*

Shaking off her father's image, she tried to think what to do next.

*Does it?*

\* \* \*

After a few hours passed with no sign of Imperial ships slipping down from the sky, Taryn's nerves began to ease. Seven hours after the alarms first sounded, full night had fallen, and she was starting to get annoyed.

"Well, that's it," she declared after another request for information from flight control was politely sidestepped. "We can't leave, they won't let us move, and they won't tell us anything. I'm going in there to find out what's going on."

"Who you gonna ask?" Del asked.

"Mon Mothma herself, if I have to," Taryn said.

Del snorted, but getting into the palace proved unexpectedly easy. After an initial hassle with two New Republic security officers, once they discovered she captained the freighter on the platform, Taryn found herself ushered into a turbolift. One of the guards poked his head in after her and punched a button on the call panel. "Good luck," he said, giving her a mock salute as the doors slid shut.

*That was easy -- too easy,* she thought, wondering what that salute thing meant. She was still puzzling over it when the doors opened on a corridor clearly far removed from the service section of the palace where she'd made her delivery earlier. Same basic decor, but this section had an unmistakably brisk military air.

As did the two armed troopers standing against the wall across from the turbolift. They eyed her alertly as she stepped out, then she saw the other two, standing on each side of the lift. Trying to ignore the four pairs of eyes trained on her, she glanced down the corridor. At one end, a blast door slid open and a frowning officer stalked toward her. Halting a meter away, he gave her a quick once-over.

"I'm Colonel Bremen," he identified himself. "And you're -- ?"

"Taryn Clancy, captain of the *Messenger*."

He nodded curtly. "If you're armed, you'll have to leave your weapons outside," he said, producing a hand-held weapons scanner.

"I'm not," Taryn said, but Bremen ran the device over her anyway.

"All right," he said, apparently satisfied. "Follow me."

A guard fell in line behind her as Taryn followed Bremen through the blast doors into another corridor. She glanced curiously into open rooms as they passed, feet faltering as a face she thought she recognized from the

holovid flashed into view. Was that *really* Mon Mothma? And if it *were* the New Republic's Chief of State, just where was this Bremen taking her?

There was no time to speculate, as he stopped beside a door and gestured for her to enter. Taryn stepped into the small office and looked at the man seated behind the desk. Good-looking and about the same age as Del, he looked vaguely familiar but she couldn't place him.

That is, until Bremen shut the door and brushed past her. "Got another one for you, General Bel Iblis. Captain Clancy of the *Messenger*," he said, and Taryn tried not to stare. She'd expected to be pawned off on some palace flunky, not brought to the man in charge of Coruscant's defense!

"Captain Clancy." Bel Iblis nodded to her courteously as Bremen folded his arms and took up a position against the office wall. "I understand you'd like an update on the situation."

"Yes, sir, I would," she said, making a conscious effort to relax and not stand at attention. "What's going on? And when will I be able to leave?"

Bel Iblis studied her silently. Just as Taryn began to fear she'd been too brash, he grimly answered. "Coruscant is surrounded. Our defenses have been forced to retreat, and we estimate the planetary shield will fail by morning."

Taryn forgot not to stare. "What'll happen then?"

"We're not waiting to find out," he said. "We'll be pulling out tonight."

"You're leaving?"

"We have no choice," Bel Iblis said heavily. "There's no way to get word to our fleets in other sectors, and even if we did, they couldn't get here before the shield fails." "But, what about the New Republic?" she persisted. Was the fledgling government really going to crumble that easily?

"The New Republic will survive," he said. "Only its headquarters will move." Something like old pain briefly shadowed his eyes. "We don't want Coruscant destroyed too, when all the Empire wants is to destroy us. Once we're off the planet, the populace ought to be safe enough."

Bremen abruptly unfolded from



the wall and opened his mouth, but subsided at a look from Bel Iblis. Taryn glanced from one to the other, suddenly aware of the tension between them, then looked back at Bel Iblis. "Where will you go?"

"Good question," he said. "That's where you come in."

"Me?" she said, warily.

"We need all the lifting capacity we can beg, borrow, or steal for the evacuation," he said, watching her intently.

Taryn got it, right away.

"The *Messenger's* not that big," she protested. "Not that fast, either. Besides, I work for the Core Courier Service, not for you. The New Republic can't just hijack my ship!"

"Actually, we can," Bel Iblis said. "And will. But not for what you think." He leaned forward, looking grave. "We've got to get word to the sector fleets that the New Republic has evacuated Coruscant and will regroup at a new base. Secrecy is absolutely vital -- we can't take the chance of the Empire tapping into any transmissions and overhearing the location of our rendezvous point. So," he spread his hands suggestively, "we send out couriers."

Taryn remained silent. She suspected he hadn't said "courier" by chance.

"Usually, we'd send out a messenger in an unmarked Intelligence ship," Bel Iblis said. Bremen opened his mouth, and again, the general shot him a warning glance. "But we need everything we've got for the evacuation."

"What if I refuse?"

"You're welcome to remain here on Coruscant," Bel Iblis said. "Or leave on one of our transports. We'll recompense the courier service for use of the ship, of course."

*Some choice*, Taryn thought sourly. *Stuck here waiting for the stormtroopers, or on the run with the New Republic.*

She sighed. "So, when do we leave?"

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Once she'd thought about it, Taryn had to agree using the *Messenger* for cover was actually pretty clever.

For one, the datacard -- with its report on the retreat from Coruscant and the rendezvous location -- was nicely anonymous, tucked in a crate with thousands of other datacards; communications bound for other Core Worlds. And that crate was just one among dozens exactly like it, stacked one on top the other in the *Messenger's* hold.

For another, the prospect of trying to sneak past an armada of Star Destroyers was almost made bearable by the sight the bulky Colonel Bremen made, stuffed into a spare uniform they'd scrounged up that was at least two sizes too small. Tugging at the too-tight collar, he stood in the cockpit doorway with the slight frown that never seemed to leave his face. Taryn didn't have to look away from her engine displays to know the uniform's pant legs ended somewhere above his ankles. Her mouth quirked slightly before she remembered Bremen was here to keep an eye on her and Del, and there was nothing funny about the situation they were in.

Her hands tightened on the controls. "Go strap in," she ordered Bremen. "We're almost ready to lift." When he didn't move, she glanced over her shoulder questioningly. "What?"

"I'll stay here," he said.

She shrugged.

"Do what you want." Del snorted. He and Bremen hadn't exchanged half a dozen words since the New Republic officer had come on board, but they clearly hadn't hit it off.

"You should let me pilot," Bremen said, again. "This isn't some simple mail drop, you know."

"No," Taryn said adamantly, as if this hadn't already been covered in Bel Iblis' office. "We made a deal. The New Republic can use my ship, but no one's flying it but me." Considering they were basically being shanghaied, she'd been surprised Bel Iblis had agreed. As it was, she half suspected the general had assigned Bremen to this mission just to get rid of him. The two clearly didn't get along. She glanced at Del. "Ready?"

"Ready," he confirmed.

She eased in the repulsors. Below, the comforting lights of Imperial City dwindled to pinpricks as they gained altitude. Bel Iblis had said the gaps between the surrounding Star Destroyers were guarded by smaller capital ships, so each pilot would have to pick their own escape route and make a run for it. "We got a course yet?" she asked Del.

"Nav computer's working on it," he said. She threw a quick look at Bremen, balancing himself in the cockpit's doorway, then checked the sensors. Nothing close enough to worry about, but she'd have to stay sharp. Bel



Iblis wanted as many ships as possible in the air and moving when he dropped the shield. With the whole swarm fleeing at once, they hoped to at least create a little confusion as they tried to sneak past the waiting Imperials.

Flashes of light danced where the planetary shield was still getting blasted, the opalescent haze shifting and rippling as it was hit. Taryn changed course slightly, aiming for a clear spot, then checked her chronometer. Almost time.

Del flipped on the comm, already tuned to the escape frequency, and as Taryn stared at the shield, she wondered what the people left below would face. Would the Empire be content to simply retake Coruscant and leave its citizens in relative peace? Or would it feel the need to punish them for not repulsing the New Republic in the first place?

Either way, she was out of it now.

"Ought to be down any time," Bremen said from behind her, here he too was watching the shield flash under the Imperial assault. "Too bad this thing doesn't have much in the way of weaponry."

Taryn's mouth tightened at the slur to her ship. As she'd already pointed out, mail freighters weren't prime targets for anyone, even pirates. There was no need to go around bristling with armament -- usually. At the moment, she conceded a little more firepower might come in handy.

Several large masses started to register on the scopes, indicating the gauntlet ahead. Taryn had never seen so many Star Destroyers in one place, and another wave of self-doubt assailed her. She'd never done anything like this before, except in her imagination. Maybe she *should* let Bremen take the controls

And then, it was too late.

"It's down," Bel Iblis' voice rang out over the comm. "Clear skies, people, and may the Force be with you!"

The planetary shield was down, and the scramble was on.

Far to port, Taryn was aware of a planet defender ion cannon being used from the surface to clear a path for some of the fleeing ships, but she kept to her own vector as they cleared the atmosphere and the waiting Imperial ships came into sight.

There it was -- her path to freedom -- straight between two Star Destroyers flanked by five smaller Dreadnaughts. They looked like two ferocious Dorax dogs surrounded by feisty puppies, and she swallowed, edging the drive up to full. Even at top speed, the *Messenger* couldn't be called fast, and she could only hope they'd be overlooked in the swarm fleeing from the surface.

And for a while, her hopes seemed answered. Aiming for a gap between the two Dreadnaughts furthest away from the Star Destroyers, the *Messenger* pelted along in the wake of another freighter, a transport, and a sleek starfighter. Alongside and slightly behind were two heavy transports. The Dreadnaughts fired, but with so many small targets, the shots were erratic and for the most part simply sizzled into space.

Their shield indicators were still green, they were nearly past the Dreadnaughts, and Taryn was beginning to think they just might make it unscathed when a sudden sharp lurch of the ship threw her and



Del against their restraints, and sent Bremen tumbling forward to sprawl unceremoniously over the sensor scopes.

"Get off!" she gritted, then clenched her teeth as another hard *thunk* spilled him to the deck. With a jolt, she saw a lot more ships around them than had been there a moment ago. Identification was easy as a TIE fighter roared past, firing at the transport ahead of them driving for deep space.

"Del?" she said. The grizzled first mate needed no further urging, loosing a volley of laser fire at the TIE fighter harassing the transport up ahead. Behind them, a dull *clunk* indicated another hit, but Taryn kept going. Their course was calculated and set; if she could just get the *Messenger* a little further away from the planet, they could make the jump to lightspeed, and safety.

One of the transports off to their side suddenly exploded in a fiery flash. Wincing, Taryn changed course slightly to steer clear of the twisted metal and spared a quick glance at the shield indicators.

Only to wish she hadn't. The indicators had gone from green to red, and they flashed with each hit. A diagnostic message was forming on the panel, the sensors showed another of those blasted TIE fighters swooping up behind them, and Taryn didn't think the *Messenger* could take too many more hits.

"Hang on," she warned Bremen, still on the deck, and threw the freighter into a dive. The TIE fighter shot past overhead, and as she brought the ship's nose back up, Taryn saw the starfighter ahead had circled back to help.

The X-wing's laser cannon flashed as it screamed toward them, and on the scopes, one of the dots behind them disappeared. The X-wing turned its attention to the TIE fighter she'd shaken while Taryn swiped at the sweat on her face and put the drive to full again. Up ahead, the freighter and transport were nowhere to be seen. Either they'd already made it to safety -- or they'd been destroyed.

Del cursed as the *Messenger* shuddered from another series of hits to the rear. The shield indicators flashed red, then went black, and the diagnostic message began to blink. "We've lost the deflectors," Taryn shouted. Swallowing back the metallic taste of fear, she was poised to plunge the ship into another dive when the console pinged, indicating they'd reached their hyperspace point.

Wrapping a hand around the levers and acutely aware of the TIE fighter closing in on them, she gently pulled back, and was rewarded by the sight of stars streaking to starlines, then fading into the mottled sky of hyperspace.

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Hurling through hyperspace toward Coriallis, Del and Colonel Bremen had plenty of time to firmly establish their mutual dislike.

Bremen didn't hide the fact that, as civilians, he didn't trust Taryn and Del to be competent. He made it clear he thought Bel Iblis should have commandeered the *Messenger*, kicked off her regular crew, and used an all-military crew to complete the mission.

Taryn tried to shrug it off, but Del retaliated by offering up barely-concealed barbs concerning the New Republic's ignominious retreat from Coruscant, while Bremen grew tighter-lipped with each crack. She thought the game childish, but as long as Bremen was busy with Del, he wasn't breathing down her back, so she didn't say anything about it.

The two had disappeared into the hold more than an hour ago, and she stood in the wardroom, wiping grease off her hands. They would be changing course at Coriallis in a few hours, and she wanted to try out the newly-repaired deflector system before it was actually put to the test.

She never got the chance.

As she strode toward the cockpit, the *Messenger* seemed to hesitate underfoot, then gave an awful shudder as stressed hull metal squealed in protest. Caught mid-step, Taryn grabbed at the bulkhead for balance, then got thrown into the cockpit as the ship seemed to slam into some immovable force. Clattering crates and a yelp sounded from the hold, while in front of her, the mottled sky of hyperspace unexpectedly became starlines, and then, with a final sickening lurch, coalesced into the starfield of realspace.

They'd been forcefully yanked out of lightspeed, and Taryn didn't even have to check the scopes to know why. Straight ahead, filling the transparisteel viewport, was an Imperial Interdictor cruiser.

Nor were they its first catch. A transport with New Republic markings drifted nearby, linked with an Imperial shuttle. Taryn wondered if it were one of the many that had so recently fled Coruscant.

"What happened?" Bremen demanded, pounding up the corridor as she got to her feet. On his heels, Del sported a fresh gash on his forehead. No answer was necessary as the comm crackled to life and a brisk voice from the cruiser *Requital* ordered them to prepare to be boarded.

Taryn sank down in the pilot's seat, mind racing. The datacard was well-hidden, and unless the Imperials were determined to read each and every missive in the hold, she didn't think they'd find it. The thoroughness of their search would probably depend on how suspicious they were. Her and Del's identification was in order; Bremen might be harder to explain, but she'd think of something. Should she admit that they'd just come from Coruscant, or --?

"I'll do the talking," Bremen announced, interrupting her thoughts. "You two keep quiet and let me handle it." He held out a hand, apparently expecting Taryn to hand over the captain's bars pinned to the front of her uniform. She stiffened.

"No, *I'll* do the talking," she corrected him with some asperity. "You looked in a mirror lately?" Clad in that ill-fitting uniform, the Imperials would never believe he was captain of the *Messenger*. Ignoring Bremen's flush of outrage, she told Del, "Go back to the airlock and wait to assist the boarding party."

"Yes, ma'am," he said crisply, backing out of the cockpit.

"Cooperate with them, *fully*," she called after him warningly. Outside, a shuttle from the *Requital* was approaching, but they still had a few minutes. Looking at Bremen, she raised an eyebrow. "Now. You were saying--?"

"Do you have any idea how serious this is?" he snapped back. "What do you think they're going to do once they're on board? Take a look at your permits, tell you to have a good day, and just leave?"

"I certainly hope so," Taryn said. "That seemed to be General Bel Iblis' idea behind using us as the courier. Look, *I'm* the captain here, and *I* have the proper ID to back it up. You have any better ideas?"

His resistance was plain, but she did have a point. "Okay, then," Taryn said. "You don't talk unless you're spoken to, you do everything the Imperials ask, promptly and courteously, and if you're carrying any weapons, you lose them now, before they come on board. Understand?"

Bremen's face looked as stiff as a droid's and his eyes glittered, but he managed a short nod. "Good," Taryn said, releasing a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. "Let's go back and meet our guests."

While the Imperial shuttle pulled alongside, she dug out the *Messenger's* permits datapad. She just had time to get back to the airlock and straighten up authoritatively before it slid open and five Imperials strode in.

The lead, a middle-aged man balding under his naval officer's cap, halted just inside while the other four troopers, all armed, fanned out in the corridor. "Commander Voldt," he briskly identified himself. "Who's in charge here?"

"I am." Taryn stepped forward. "Captain Taryn Clancy, of the Core Courier Service. This is my crew."

Voldt eyed her, gaze lingering on the curves of her uniform, then slid a glance over Del and Bremen. He noted Bremen's exposed ankles, then flicked pale eyes back to her. "Courier service? This a mail ship?"

"Yes, sir," Taryn said. "En route to Coriallis."

"Where from?"



She'd already decided there was no sense lying. The vector on which they'd been yanked out of hyperspace pretty well spelled it out. "Our last scheduled stop was Coruscant," she told him. "But we dropped into the system, saw what looked like the entire Imperial fleet around the planet, and decided to give the place a pass. Didn't want to get mixed up in anything, you know?"



He nodded slowly, not looking entirely convinced. "You didn't deliver your shipment?" he asked. "Don't your employers promise prompt delivery?"

Taryn allowed herself to look slightly taken aback. "Well, yes," she said. "But they frown on dropping in on a war zone even more."

Voldt stared at her, then snorted. In amusement, or disbelief, she couldn't tell. At his casual hand gesture, two of the troopers disappeared to search the ship. "Let's see some identification," he suggested.

"Certainly." Taryn passed him the permits datapad. He transmitted the ship's license and registry information to the *Requital* to be checked out, then inspected their identification, raising an eyebrow when Bremen failed to produce an ID. Bremen managed to look both embarrassed and earnest as he muttered, "Sorry, sir. Got robbed in port."

Voldt flicked that speculative glance over his uniform again. "Looks like that's not all they took," he commented. "How inconvenient for you."

Bremen nodded. Voldt stared at him a moment longer, then glanced at the two troopers returning from searching the ship. "No one else aboard, sir," one reported, while the other stepped up holding two blasters.

"Who do these belong to?" Voldt asked.

"That one's mine," Taryn said, indicating the blaster she kept hidden under the sleep pad in her cabin. She looked at Bremen and Del. "Whose is this?"

"Mine, Capt'n." Del stepped forward. "I know you don't like us carryin' on board, so I had it stashed in my bunk. Sorry," he added, looking sheepish.

"We'll discuss it later," she said repressively, wondering where Bremen had "lost" his weapon so it wouldn't be found.

"Traitors?" she echoed, carefully.



"Traitors to the Empire," he said, finally looking up as they reached the hold. "Rebels, fleeing from Coruscant. We've driven them off and rescued the populace from their terrorist ways, but now, like the cowards they are, they're scurrying off to wherever they think they'll find safety." His thin lips turned up in an unpleasant smile. "We don't intend to let them run too far."

Taryn wondered if Interdictor cruisers were sitting along all of the most well-traveled hyperspace lanes leading from Coruscant. If so, a good many fleeing ships had undoubtedly fallen right into the Imperials' trap, including that transport she'd spotted earlier. Perhaps even themselves.

She shook off the thought. *No, so far we're doing fine.* The only thing to worry about was the datacard, and that was well hidden somewhere inside the crates that filled the hold. Reassured, she keyed open the door and gestured for Voldt to step in.

He did, glancing around the room and then stepping over to peer at the stacks of sealed crates. "These are bound for Coriallis," he noted, studying the labels on the outermost crates. Voldt gave her an unfathomable look, then nodded to the trooper, who stepped back, still holding both blasters. He handed the datapad back to Taryn. "Captain, I'd like to see the contents of your hold, if I may."

Despite the phrasing, it wasn't a request.

Taryn led the way, trying to gauge how suspicious the Imperials were, and how complete they might insist on making this search. So far, Voldt's manner hadn't given anything away. Casually, she looked over her shoulder. "If you don't mind me asking, sir, why were we stopped? Is this some sort of checkpoint?"

There was no mistaking the amused snort this time. "You could call it that," Voldt said dryly. His eyes were fixed on the sway of her dark hair against her back. "It could be considered a checkpoint for traitors."

"Traitors?" she echoed, carefully.

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"Yes, sir, that's our next stop," Taryn confirmed.

"But where's the shipment you *didn't* leave on Coruscant?" He swung to face her, one eyebrow raised in query.

Where was it, indeed? Taryn's stomach clenched as she considered the question. Not only had they delivered the mail bound for the Imperial Palace, but they'd off-loaded the regular Coruscant mail, too. There was nothing here to back up her assertion that they hadn't landed on the planet. Excuses vied for space on the tip of her tongue, but before she could blurt any of them out, Del stepped forward.

"I moved 'em out of the way, Capt'n," he said, and indicated three crates piled haphazardly in the far corner. Each was labeled bound for Coruscant, and she held her breath as Voldt insisted on opening up all three. But randomly picking out datacards to inspect, he found them all properly labeled with Coruscant destinations. Relieved, Taryn slanted a glance at her first mate, wondering whose mail had been borrowed to pull off this masquerade. Clearly, Del and Bremen hadn't spent all their time back here bickering.

"Hmmp," Voldt grunted as he replaced the last crate's lid, and looked around the hold as if hoping to find Mon Mothma herself hiding among the load lifters. Pointing at two of the troopers, he ordered all the crates examined. But the search was cursory, with the troopers merely opening them up and confirming there was mail inside.

Brusquely ordering the crates resealed, Voldt motioned for Taryn and crew to follow him, and strode back down the corridor to the airlock. Calling the *Requital*, he confirmed that the *Messenger's* permits were in order and then, looking somewhat disappointed, told Taryn they were free to go.

Trying not to let her relief show, she had to work harder to keep from shooting a told-you-so look at Bremen. The four troopers rejoined them, and after an unexpected handshake from Voldt, during which he held on a tad too long for Taryn's liking, the Imperials headed back to their ship.

She got the nav computer busy recalculating their course, then turned the freighter around and drove for the stars, trying to grab enough distance to jump to lightspeed. Glancing again at the captured New Republic transport, Taryn wondered what fate awaited its occupants.

When the console finally pinged, she cupped her hand around the hyperdrive levers, gently pulled them back, and gratefully left that particular problem behind.

\* \* \*

Not that she didn't still have problems, she thought in exasperation nearly a week later, staring out at the empty expanse of space before them and acutely aware of Bremen looking over her shoulder, as usual.

The rest of the trip to Coriallis had been uneventful, and once there, Bremen had programmed the nav computer with a new course. Since then, they'd dropped in and out of hyperspace a dozen times on their way to intercept one of the New Republic's battle fleets, somewhere in the Borderlands.

At least, Taryn thought it was the Borderlands. She didn't recognize the majority of the places they popped in on, and Bremen saw no reason to enlighten her -- about their location, or anything else. He curtly informed her she'd get control of the *Messenger* back once they intercepted the fleet and delivered the message. Well, here they were at the intercept point. So where was the fleet?

"They might be a little late," Bremen said, and Taryn glanced over her shoulder to see a furrow creasing his brow. "They *are* scheduled to be here," he added at the expression on her face.

"If they don't know we're coming, what are they scheduled to meet?" she asked. Bremen ignored the question; clearly, this was yet another bit of information that mere civilians couldn't be trusted with. Since they'd dropped into the outer edges of a system and were skulking around like thieves instead of getting closer to one of the planets, Taryn figured the New Republic had an outpost here that its fleet was checking up on. Bremen just didn't want to get close enough for her and Del to take a look.

She sighed. Despite a week of close quarters living, or perhaps because of it, Bremen wasn't any easier to get along with. She'd finally had to order Del to stop his needling -- if only she could order Bremen to knock off his condescending manner, as well. His attitude reminded her far too strongly of her father.

Because it was possible the fleet had been delayed, and because they really had nowhere else to go, the *Messenger* simply drifted for the next several hours. Taryn was sitting in the cockpit staring out at the stars and trying to recall astrogation charts of the Borderlands region when Bremen came in and dropped into the co-pilot's seat.

Mildly surprised, she glanced over as he studied the long-range sensors. He'd finally stopped hovering over her, apparently reassured she wasn't going to break into the nav computer to find out where they were if he didn't keep an eye on her every minute. Naturally, she had, only to find that all records of their past several jumps had been erased.

So it wasn't so much a matter of trust, as that it simply didn't matter.

"You don't think much of us, do you?" she said.

He took his time looking up. "Pardon?"

"It's not just you and your New Republic on the line here, you know. It's me and Del, too," she said. "If you're caught, we're caught. You think we're going to do anything to mess this thing up?"

"Not deliberately, no," he conceded. "But accidents happen. What about when Voldt wanted to see the Coruscant mail -- you hadn't thought of that, had you? What if there hadn't been anything to show him?"

"That cloak and dagger stuff is *your* department," she retorted, but the comment stung. He was right; and instead of getting defensive, she should admit it and learn from the experience. "That doesn't justify treating us like dimglows, and keeping me in the dark about where we're going. I have a right to know."

He folded his arms and gave her a level stare. "Captain Clancy, it's no secret I don't think you or Del Sato should have been allowed on this mission. You're civilians, and more of a hindrance than a help. You can't be expected to make the kind of split-second decisions needed to keep us out of trouble."

Taryn flushed, and concentrated on keeping her temper as he continued. "But you're here anyway, so consider being 'kept in the dark' as your protection. If you don't know anything, you can't give it away."

"What do you take me for?" she asked, affronted. "If I wanted to give you up, I would've done it when Voldt was aboard. You'll not ice I didn't."

"No, you didn't," he agreed. "But it's better to be prepared than be sorry."

Taryn was debating whether it was even worth discussing any further when she was saved from a decision by a sudden blip on the sensors.

A ship, emerging from hyperspace about 30 kilometers away.

She reacted before Bremen did, flipping switches to start bringing the engines on line. "Del!" she yelled down the corridor, trying to maneuver the sluggish *Messenger* around to face the oncoming ship. As it came into view, Taryn identified it as a slightly battered-looking Skipray blastboat, with no markings indicating who it might belong to. But it clearly wasn't the fleet.

*Great*, she thought grimly even as the comm light flashed, indicating the starfighter was hailing them. She flipped it on as Del arrived, noting the engines were only up to point three-five power. They wouldn't be able to run, just yet.

A cool female voice came over the comm speaker. "Unidentified freighter, do you need assistance?" it asked, as the Skipray slanted to the side a bit, putting it just out of line with the *Messenger's* laser cannon. Taryn kept the freighter turning to face the potential threat as she answered.

"This is Captain Clancy of the *Messenger*, and thanks, but no, we're fine," she said quickly, before Bremen could jump in. He got out of Del's seat and stood in the small space between them, frowning out at the blastboat.

"Captain Clancy? You're just who I'm looking for," the voice said as Taryn took another look at her displays. Up to point six-five power; at least they could start moving. She started the ship sidling away as the Skipray's pilot asked, "I wonder if I might speak with your guest?"

An unexpected request, and there was a slight inflection on the last word that made Taryn glance up at Bremen. To her surprise, he appeared to be gritting his teeth. "This is Bremen," he said shortly.

"Ah, Colonel. This is Mara Jade," the pilot identified herself. "I see you made it off Coruscant in one piece." She sounded vaguely amused.

"Get to the point," Bremen snapped. Taryn and Del looked at him in astonishment. Even at his most supercilious with them, he'd never been downright rude.

"The *point* is that your rendezvous with the Borderlands fleet is off," she said, clearly unruffled. "They took a detour, and won't be through here for days. High Command's already sent a new courier out to their location, so you're off the hook."

"I wasn't notified of any change," Bremen said.

"You're *being* notified."

"Why'd they send you?" he shot back.

"Because word of the fleet's location came through one of my contacts in the smuggler's coalition," she said. "Information *is* what we're getting paid for."

Now Taryn thought she understood Bremen's animosity. If this Mara Jade were a smuggler, Bremen's law-and-order stance wouldn't allow him much in the way of tolerance. "Do you have any confirmation of that?" he was asking.

"Just the fleet's new location," she answered coolly. "If you're ready, I'll transmit it to you." A data feed light on the panel lit up, and a series of numbers scrolled past on the display. "Not that you need it," she added. "High Command said you could go on home."

"Thanks, but maybe we'll just stick around here a while longer," Bremen said, clearly still suspicious.

There was a pause from the Skipray. "Suit yourself," Mara finally said. The comm light winked out as the ship swung around and started heading away. Before Taryn could ask Bremen how long he planned to wait, another ship suddenly dropped into space ahead of them.

Bremen swore viciously even as Taryn recognized the distinctive shape of a *Carrack*-class cruiser. "Go, *go!*" he barked at her as the comm light lit up again and a harsh voice ordered them to stop or be destroyed. Taryn turned the freighter away from the cruiser's ominous bulk and slapped at the thrust. She and Del were slammed back in their seats as the *Messenger* leapt forward, Bremen somehow managing to hang on as they drove for deep space. Out of the corner of her eye, Taryn saw the Skipray had turned and was coming back to their position, and a moment later, the sensors told her why.

The cruiser had launched TIE fighters.

"Oh blast it, not again," she muttered. Luck had seen the *Messenger* through its first encounter with TIE fighters; she doubted it would be any match for them this time. "Del, get us a course out of here," she snapped, trying to gauge how soon the two fighters would overtake them.

"I can't -- I don't even know where we are!" he snapped back.

"What about those?" Taryn indicated the coordinates Mara Jade had transmitted, still displayed on the console.

"No!" Bremen objected. "She could have set a trap. That cruiser didn't just show up by chance." He lurched as a thump to the *Messenger's* rear indicated that the TIE fighters had caught up. "Now she's back to finish the job," he added bitterly, glaring at the Skipray as it headed towards them.

Lasers flashed as it neared, and Taryn wondered if he were right. But the Skipray zipped past overhead, and a moment later one of the dots on the sensor scopes blinked out. "I wouldn't hang around, if I were you," Mara Jade advised, and Taryn decided it was time for one of those split-second command decisions Bremen thought beyond her.

"Use 'em," she ordered Del, who was already busy with the nav computer. Bremen protested, but before he could intervene another hit rocked the ship, sending him stumbling. By the time he'd clawed his way back up to position behind Taryn, the *Messenger's* shield indicator flickered an ominous red again.

Hands tense on the controls, Taryn tried to avoid the laser fire which peppered their aft end. But the old freighter simply wasn't a match for the faster starfighter. If it weren't for the Skipray harassing the TIE and forcing it to split its attention between two targets, the *Messenger* would've already been blown to bits.

They still might be.

Another hard lurch threw Bremen against the back of Taryn's chair. Clinging to the seat, he looked over her shoulder at the sensors and shouted something. Just as she glanced down at the displays and realized with a jolt that the cruiser's remaining two TIE fighters were on their way to join the attack, the nav computer finally pinged.

She pulled back the levers, and they escaped into the blessed emptiness of hyperspace.

\* \* \*

It turned out to be a rather short hop.

Barely an hour after their escape from the cruiser, the proximity alarm clanged, indicating a minute to breakout. Bremen had spent most of the trip threatening to abort the jump, but even he was unwilling to risk stressing the *Messenger* with a second unexpected emergence.

Despite Taryn pointing out that the Skipray had aided in their getaway, he remained convinced that Mara Jade had sold them out to the Imperials. He saw no other explanation for the cruiser's appearance. "A panthac doesn't change its stripes," he said darkly, but declined to explain the comment.



The console pinged again, and Taryn eased back the hyperdrive levers. Mottled sky became starlines, which became stars. They'd arrived.

There was nothing nearby, but the long-range sensors showed a number of ships some distance off their port side. Within moments, they were close enough to identify. It was, indeed, the New Republic fleet.

She let Bremen do the talking when the Mon Calamari cruiser *Hope* hailed them. Its captain confirmed a messenger from the New Republic had already arrived. "But we're still glad to see you," Captain Arboga added in his gravelly voice. "The datacard he brought us appears damaged, and we'd like to compare it with yours to fill in the blanks."

The only thing left to do was drop Bremen and his datacard off. Greatly relieved at the prospect, Taryn headed for the *Hope*. They were still several kilometers out when Bremen stepped into the cockpit holding a small circular object.

Her eyes widened in horror when she saw it. "Where did that come from?"

"The hold," Bremen told her grimly. "Ironically, in the same crate the datacard was hidden. The Imperials must have planted it when they restacked the crates." The card in his other hand indicated that it, at least, had escaped Imperial treachery. "That must've been how they found us," he added grudgingly, a half-hearted concession that the cruiser's appearance hadn't been Mara Jade's fault, after all. Leaning past Taryn, he flipped on the comm. "Captain," he reported, "we've found a homing beacon -- "

"And we've found who's tracking it," Arboga cut him off. "Take a look aft."

Taryn glanced at the scopes and stifled a groan. The cruiser they'd so recently escaped had appeared behind them. Jabbing the drive up to full, she mentally cursed as the sudden thrust shoved her back in her seat. She and Del had been so close to going home. Now here they were, stuck in the middle of another battle between the Empire and the New Republic.

"It's no match for the entire fleet," Del said, sounding surprised the cruiser continued to follow them.

"But it's more than a match for this scow, if we don't get out of range," Bremen added tightly. He glared at Taryn. "Can't you get a little more speed out of this thing?"

She clenched her teeth. Enough was enough. "Just shut up," she gritted. "If you'd done *your* job and found that damn beacon when they planted it, we wouldn't be in this mess."

Bremen opened his mouth, but a *thunk* to the rear cut off whatever he'd been about to say. The deflector indicator flickered weakly, and Taryn glanced down to see a diagnostic message scroll across the display. She looked at Del. His face was tense as he, too, summed up the shields' sorry state. The *Messenger* shuddered with another hit, and the diagnostic message turned red and began to flash. Del looked grimly resigned.

Leaning forward, Taryn tapped a button and a previously dark section of the board lit up. "The backup shield generator," she said shortly at Del's astonished expression. "I finished it while fixing the main after we got away from Coruscant."

"But, we didn't have all the parts," he said

. "You just have to know where to look," Taryn said, thinking of how she'd cannibalized the main generator to jury-rig the backup. Redundant shields were a precaution she'd learned from her father, and she'd installed a backup generator in every ship she'd worked on. Seldom needed, she hadn't hurried to get the *Messenger's* up and running. But the retreat from Coruscant had changed her mind. "It won't hold up for long," she added, as another hit rocked the ship. "But maybe it'll last long enough."

Nursing all the speed out of the freighter she could, but still painfully aware it wasn't enough, Taryn drove for the distant safety of the *Hope's* bulbous bulk. Lured into finishing off the tempting target, the cruiser followed.

It followed too far.

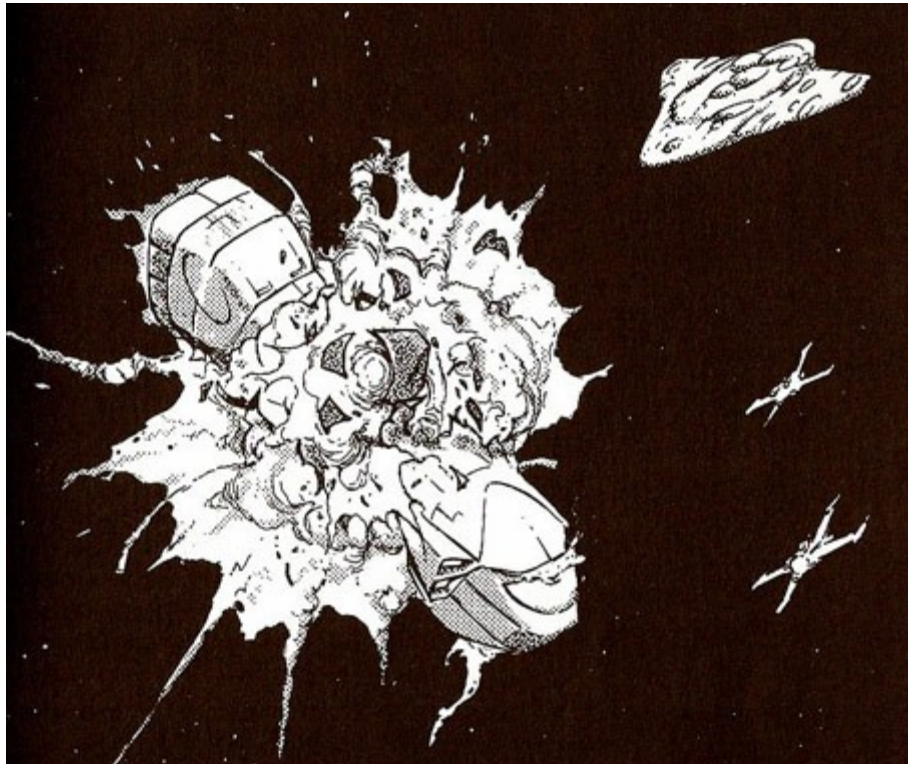
Just when the shields' diagnostic message was scrolling past in red again and Taryn despaired of lasting much longer, suddenly, they were there.

The *Hope's* turbolaser punch was joined by two other Mon Cal cruisers, and the Carrack cruiser abruptly gave up the chase as its commander realized they'd strayed within firing range of the New Republic fleet. Flames danced along scorched sections of its port side, and small explosion briefly illuminated the hull above one of its dorsal exhaust ports. Apparently deciding retreat was the prudent course of action, the cruiser banked away, its powerful sublight engines driving for deep space.

But it wasn't fast enough.

The brilliant flare from the exploding cruiser lit up the *Messenger's* canopy. Out her port window, Taryn caught a glimpse of fast-moving specks -- X-wings, returning to escort formation around the fleet after pumping deadly proton torpedoes into the ship's damaged areas. The fireball began to fade as she approached the *Hope's* hangar bay.

Behind her, Bremen was silent. Cycling back the repulsors and gently setting the ship down on the deck, Taryn waited expectantly for a critique.



"You didn't tell me we had extra shields," he said instead.

"You didn't ask."

"Yes, well --" He hesitated so long that Taryn half-turned to look up at him. The habitual frown was still there, but his eyes were direct as he admitted, "When the main generator went, I figured we were done for."

"We almost were," she said. "Credit my father -- he's the one who taught me how to get things up and running on practically nothing but hope and air. After Coruscant, I thought we could use an extra set of shields."

"They certainly came in handy," Bremen agreed. He paused again, even longer this time. "Look," he finally said, "I know I objected to you two being on this mission, but ... all in all, it's worked out okay."

*Okay?* Taryn stared at him, disconcerted. They'd been shot at, yanked out of hyperspace and boarded, and had eluded an Imperial cruiser to successfully deliver the datacard. Was this his idea of a compliment?

Bremen flushed slightly at her expression, but added, "We're always looking for good pilots, and if you've a mind for a career change, the New Republic could use someone like you."

She didn't know what to say.

"Think about it," he said. "I'll leave you some contacts to get in touch with, if you're interested. You, too," he told Del.

"Not me," Del said. "I'm retirin'."

Taryn glanced at him in surprise. That's right; after 30 years of hauling mail to the same old ports along the same old route, once they finished this run his piloting days were done.

Was that really what she wanted to look forward to?

"Thanks for the offer," she told Bremen. "I'll think about it. But right now, I've got a route to finish. Not to mention, figure a course back to Coriallis."

Bremen leaned over Del's shoulder. "This ought to help," he said, punching up a chart on the nav computer. Before leaving, he handed her a datacard and urged again, "Think about it."

As Taryn cleared the *Hope's* hangar bay and headed toward the first of a short series of hyperspace hops that would take them back to the Core, she tried to imagine what her father would say if she gave up delivering mail and started flying for the New Republic instead.

Would he say something patronizing -- or would he be pleased? She considered it a minute, then shrugged. Gazing out at the stars, she realized she no longer cared what he said.

Taryn smiled as she pulled back the levers and the stars streaked, then faded to the swirling sky of hyperspace. She was back on course.